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Aorist in Lhagang Tibetan

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1 Prolegomena

Aorist (< *gr.* ἀόριστος ‘indefinite, vague’ < ὅρος ‘limit’) is a Greek term, but it should not be Greek to us. Aorist in Greek, whether it is Classical or Modern, is a clearly defined category of the verb in both the morphological and semantic aspects. It is very likely that many dialects of Kham Tibetan have the Aorist category in their verb system; however, this term is not used frequently, maybe due to ambiguity as a term of descriptive linguistics.

It is clear and unambiguous that Aorist functions as one of the Tense-Aspect categories in Greek, neither simple Tense nor Aspect. In Modern Greek, Aorist is explained as “past perfective”. In Tibetic languages, especially in Lhagang Tibetan, Aorist functions as a Tense-Aspect category which is very close to past perfective; however, it is different from Perfective widely used in the description of Slavonic languages, and hence we choose the term Aorist for Lhagang Tibetan. We basically follow the core meaning of Aorist in Greek (mainly Modern but to some extent Classical) and do not consider usages attested in other languages like Turkish; however, Aorist in languages such as Bulgarian and Croatian is similar to Greek. As far as we know, the use of Aorist in Lhagang Tibetan is partially similar to *adyatanī* (Aorist) of Sanskrit as well as *passé simple* in French, *passato remoto* in Italian, and *perfectum* in Latin.

Lhagang Tibetan (Minyag Rabgang Kham; according to the classification of Suzuki 2015:25) is one of the Tibetic languages spoken in the easternmost Tibetsphere, located in Tagong (lHa sgang) Village (henceforth Lhagang Village), Tagong Town, Kangding (Dar mdo) Municipality, Ganzi (dKar mdzes) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China. This language has been described as a sketch grammar by Suzuki & Sonam Wangmo (2016), and Suzuki & Sonam Wangmo (2018) discuss the evidential system of Lhagang Tibetan. Evidentiality, morphologically a part of the Tense-Aspect-Modality+Evidentiality&Epistemicity (TAM+E&E) system, is principally marked in various suffixes of a verb in Tibetic languages (Tournadre & Lapolla 2014, Vokurková 2008). Our “Aorist” seems to correspond to “Perfective” in Oisel (2017) and “Completed past” in Tournadre (p.c.).

Here we will discuss Aorist compared with Perfect in Lhagang Tibetan. Both Aorist and Perfect seem to describe a situation that an action has completed or accomplished. The suffix of Aorist /-zə/ can be used following a verb stem, either alone, with an egophoric evidential marker /-ji:/, or with a statement evidential marker /-reʔ/, whereas the forms of Perfect has already been incorporated into evidential categories: /-tʰe:/ (sensory evidential) and /-kʰe:/ (non-sensory or statement-inferential evidential). We will describe these three suffixes more in detail, and discuss what is an essential sense of Aorist, based on data taken from elicitations, natural conversations, and narrative stories. We use the following narratives: **(Origin)** *Origin of Lhagang*; **(Pig)** *King’s Pig*; **(Lark)** *Prince’s wife become a Lark*; **(S&W)** *Sheep and Wolf*; **(mDzo)** *White mdzo mo*; **(H&T)** *Hare and Tiger*; **(3Birds)** *Three Birds*; **(L&P)** *Lark and Partridge*.

2 Usage of Aorist and Perfect: An overview

We cite four consecutive sentences (1.1)-(1.4) from the narrative (**Pig**) to demonstrate how Aorist is distinguished from Perfect.

- (1.1) 'te: 'tə -^htə: ji -^mbo lo? -ⁿgo-la ^_{ne}:-ne: 'n^{du}?-zə ^_{ji}:-k^{he}:
then that place for cattle dung on-LOC sleep-CONJ sit-AOR-PFT.NSEN

‘Then, he slept and sat on that place for dung.’

- (1.2) 'tə -^{fi}la ^{fi}gε-tə -za? ^htəi? tə -^ph^a? ^{fi}gε-gə -k^{ho} -^phu gə la
then monk-that a whole night pig-ERG 3 absolutely
'_{ne}: 'ma-^htəu?-zə re?
sleep NEG-CAUS-AOR

‘Then, that monk was absolutely not allowed to sleep by the pig for a whole night.’

- (1.3) ^_{fā}-ta 'fā -ze: -^htə: ji -^mbo lo? ^_{ja}:-^hko -^htə: ji -^mbo lo?
oink-COM oink say place for cattle dung DIR-dig place for cattle dung
^_{ja}:-^hko-zə re?
DIR-dig-AOR

‘(The pig) was oinking and oinking, and repeating to dig up the place for dung.’

- (1.4) 'te: 'tə ri ⁿdə re? ^_{ja}:-^hko-k^ha-te -^{fi}la ^{fi}gε -ts^{hi}? k^ha ^za-k^{he}:
then be like that DIR-dig-just when-TOP monk get angry-PFT.NSEN
-ts^{hi}? k^ha 'za
get angry

‘Then, that is like that: just when it dug, the monk got so angry,’ (**Pig**)

Of the four sentences, we find three types of suffixes: Aorist+non-sensory Perfect (1.1), Aorist (1.2; 1.3), and non-sensory Perfect (1.4). We analyse that this difference reflects the essence of Aorist and Perfect following the context. Aorist+non-sensory Perfect type indicates the completed past of the actions occurring on the background of the story; Aorist denotes the completed past of the actions which play an important role in the plot; Perfect tells the situation of non-completed actions occurring on the background. The narrator makes a story-telling divided into a descriptive part and a main plot part by using other phonetic features such as intonation too.

An abridged version of the tabular on the combination of Aorist and Perfect with three principle evidentials (egophoric, statement, sensory) is as follows:

| TA\Evidential | Egophoric (E) | Statement | Sensory (SEN) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Aorist (AOR) | /-zə ji:/ | /-zə re?/ | --- |
| Perfect (PFT) | --- | /-k ^{he} :/ | /-t ^{he} :/ |

Aorist does not have a sensory form, and Perfect does not have an egophoric form. Other than the forms in the table above, Aorist has a form /-zə/ alone. We have not classified it yet; however, it is used regardless of egophoric or non-egophoric descriptions. See Suzuki & Sonam Wangmo (2018) for an enlarged version. Then, we need explore which functions in descriptive linguistics bring this difference between Aorist and Perfect.

3 Action-focus opposed to result-focus

Aorist describes an action itself rather than a result of an action. An example from the narrative (**mDzo**):

- | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| (2) | ʼjɕ | ṽp ^h a ri | ṽk ^h ɕ mba | ṽh ^h tea ṽtso: tsoʔ | ṽn ^h dzo mo |
| | again | opposite side | house | single tall upright | mdzo mo |
| | ṽh ^h ka: bo | ṽʔə-ri:-zə | ṽze:-k ^h e: | | |
| | white | Q-see-AOR | say-PFT.NSEN | | |

‘Again, (the middle sister) said: “Did (you=the demon) see a white mdzo mo in the single tall upright house on the opposite side?” ’ (**mDzo**)

Aorist appears in a quoted sentence as an interrogative, and it is intended that the speaker (the middle sister) asks a question whether the addressee (the demon) *did see* a white mdzo mo or not.

Another example is from (**S&W**):

- | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| (3) | ʼte | ṽluʔ | ʼma wu | ṽ ^h ŋi: ʔa-gə |
| | then | sheep | mother and son | two-ERG |
| | ṽe ^h ə ʔə | ṽh ^h teiʔ | ṽh ^h te:- ^h za:-loʔ-zə | ṽ ^h ji:-k ^h e: |
| | paper | one | give-put-pretend-AOR-PFT.NSEN | |

‘Then, the sheep mother and son pretended to give a paper.’ (**S&W**)

In this story, the action described in (3) plays a key role of the plot. Many parts are narrated in Perfect, but Aorist is used in this place.

Both the examples (2) and (3) can also be interpreted as descriptions of an event which has just happened. In other words, the narrator employs Aorist as a “near past” meaning compared with Perfect.

The examples (4abc) from elicitation also demonstrate the difference of foci:

- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| (4a) | ṽk ^h o | ṽ ^h ziʔ ṽ ^h daʔ ṽ ^h dzaʔ-zə reʔ |
| | 3SG | slip-AOR |
| | ‘He slipped.’ | |
| (4b) | ṽk ^h o | ṽ ^h ziʔ ṽ ^h daʔ ṽ ^h dzaʔ-t ^h e: |
| | 3SG | slip-PFT |
| | ‘(I have seen) He slipped.’ | |
| (4c) | ṽk ^h o | ṽ ^h ziʔ ṽ ^h daʔ ṽ ^h dzaʔ-k ^h e: |
| | 3SG | slip-PFT.NSEN |
| | ‘(I indirectly know that) He slipped.’ | |

The three examples can simply be translated as ‘he slipped’ in English. The meaning of (4a) is not related to Intentionality (see Section 4) ‘he intentionally slipped’ because the verb /ṽ^hziʔ ṽ^hdaʔ ṽ^hdzaʔ/ ‘slip’ is a non-controllable verb and it never expresses Intentionality. Therefore, the essential difference between (4a) and (4bc) is a focus, i.e., the action or the result; that between (4b) and (4c) is evidentiality, i.e., Sensory or Non-sensory (alternatively analysed as Statement). An interpretation of (4a) is “neutral in evidentiality” on the one side and “focus on the action” on the other side. The use of Aorist focuses on the action ‘his slipping’, while Perfect focuses on the result of the action with two kinds of access to information (sensory or non-sensory).

4 Intentionality of action

A combination of “verb root + Aorist” means intentionality of the action when the verb belongs to Controllable. If a non-controllable verb is used with Aorist, it denotes a focus on the action as described in Section 3.

A pair regarding intentionality appears in elicitations, as in:

- (5a) ʔŋa ʔza ma ʔza-zə
 1SG food eat-AOR
 ‘I ate food.’
- (5b) ʔŋa ʔza ma ʔza-k^he:
 1SG food eat-PFT.NSEN
 ‘I carelessly ate food (that I should not eat).’

The verb ‘eat’ in the pair (5) is a controllable verb. Hence, the intentionality of the action generally exists. In this case, the use of Perfect non-sensory (PFT.NSEN) as (5b) is rather “marked”.

Another example similar to (5b) is as follows:

- (6) ʔŋa ʔ^hgo ʔma-^hdzɛʔ-k^he:
 1SG door NEG-close-PFT.NSEN
 ‘I should have closed the door.’ (Situation: ‘I forgot closing the door.’)

The use of Perfect non-sensory implies that Aorist contains a meaning of intentionality. Since Aorist to some extent contains intentionality, endopathic (non-controllable) verbs, such as /ʔ^htoʔ/ ‘be hungry’ and /ʔna/ ‘be sick’, are rarely followed by Aorist.

5 Near Past or Aktionsart

Aorist sometimes emphasises specific Aktionsart, especially inchoative and accomplishment.

Aorist can express an accomplishment in some cases, e.g., from the narrative (H&T):

- (7) ʔtʌʔ t^hoʔ ʔtʌʔ ^hzaʔ ʔlũ-nə ʔ^htaʔ ʔtə la
 top of cliff bottom of cliff fall-CONJ tiger there
 ʔ^hseʔ-te^hʌʔ-zə reʔ
 kill-can-AOR

‘(The hare) made (the tiger) fall from the top to the bottom of the cliff and was able to kill the tiger there.’

(H&T)

This sentence emphasises an accomplishment of the action which led the tiger to be killed. The tiger was probably dead, but the narrator’s intention is on the achievement of making the tiger fall down. This function is related to ‘punctual’ and ‘momentary’ features.

In historical narratives, Aorist often appears together with a hearsay evidential marker; however, sometimes Aorist seems to function as an inchoative.

- (8) ʔteo wo-gə ʔk^ha ʔaʔ-zə-reʔ-sə reʔ
 Jowo-ERG speak-AOR-HS

‘The Jowo began to speak.’ (Origin)

In the case of (8), it is also possible to interpret the function of Aorist as intentionality of the action

because the Jowo (statue of the Bodhisattva) can have intention to do although the people travelling with the Jowo did not think that he could utter something.

6 Strategy of Aorist in narratives

We look back to the description of Section 2. Aorist functions as an element making a plot of the story in contrast with Perfect making its background. The next consecutive example (9) from **(Pig)** demonstrates another function of Aorist:

| | | | | | |
|-------|-------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|
| (9.1) | ˈte: | ᵀpʰaʔ ʰgɛ | ˈŋo-tə | ʌkʰə-nə tə | ˈkʰo-rɔ̃ |
| | then | pig | head-DEF | carry-CONJ | 3-self |
| | ˈhɬə wa | ˈtʰã tɬeʔ-la | ˈʔə ˈɖa | ˈʰzu-nə | ˈhɬuʔ-nə |
| | cattle dung | all-DAT | like that | do-CONJ | point-CONJ |
| | ˈnɖə | ˈʔə-reʔ | ˈnɖə | ˈʔə-reʔ | ˈnɖə |
| | this | Q-CPV | this | Q-CPV | this |
| | ˈʔə-reʔ | ʌze:-nə | ˈkʰə lo: loʔ- zə | | |
| | Q-CPV | say-CONJ | pretend-AOR | | |

‘Then carrying the pig head, he did like this, by pointing every cattle dung, saying: ‘Is this?, Is this?, Is this?’, pretending (he did not know).’

| | | | | | |
|-------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|
| (9.2) | ʼte: | ᵛkʰo-rɔ̃-gə | ᵛta: | ᵛza:-zə-gə | ᵛju |
| | then | 3-self-ERG | sign | put-NML-GEN | turquoise |
| | ʌreʔ-mo | ʼte: | ᵛdə | ʼreʔ | ᵛze:-nɛ: |
| | CPV-PART | then | this | CPV | say-CONJ |
| | ᵛju | ᵛtsʰə la | ʼlɛ-ᵛzaʔ-kʰe: | | |
| | turquoise | hither | take-put-PFT.NSEN | | |

‘Then, the turquoise was already with a sign by him, wasn’t it? Then, he said: ‘This is the one’, and took out the turquoise.’ **(Pig)**

Both (9.1) and (9.2) should be put on the plot; however, the main verb in (9.1) is Aorist, and that of (9.2) is Perfect. In this case, we can consider which action is more important or interesting in the whole story. As described in Section 3, Aorist has an action-focus function. For the narrator (or a story-telling in general), the action ‘taking out a turquoise’, which has already been suggested in the earlier part of the story, does not form an important scenery. Rather, the action ‘pretending not knowing the fact’ is more attractive for audiences.

We frequently find a combination of “Aorist + statement Perfect” in a narrative mode, which describes a background description in completed past in a story-telling.

(10) 'te 'ʰdza: po-gə ˈʰjo: mo 'ma rə ˈʰdzuʔ-ʰo:-zə-kʰe:
 then king-GEN maid downwards run-come-AOR-PFT.NSEN

‘Then, a maid of the king came down running.’ **(Pig)**

The example (10) is a beginning sentence after a change of the background scene. Belonging to the background, the story still focuses on the action (running down) of the maid.

If the difference of a description from its background matters, the combination of “Aorist + statement

Perfect” appears in general conversations.

- (11) 'na nĩ lo 'ŋĩgũ k^ha ˈtʰaʔ mo tɛiʔ ˈtʰɛˈaʔ-zə ji:-k^he:
 last year winter very be cold-AOR-PFT.NSEN

‘In the last year’s winter, it was very cold.’

This utterance will convey a meaning that the situation of the temperature functions as a part of the key events of a story although it is a part of a background.

However, there is another “Aorist + hearsay” formulation: /-zə reʔ-zə reʔ/ or /-zə reʔ-sə reʔ/ (AOR-HS) ‘it is said that someone did something’. E.g.:

- (12) ʔə n^hdə ˈho:-tə ˈze:-zə reʔ-zə reʔ
 this come-NML say-AOR-HS

‘(One bird) said: “that (person) is coming”.’ (3Birds)

This formulation is often attested in historical narratives, such as (**Origin**) mentioned above:

- (13) ʔeo wo-gə ˈk^ha tʰaʔ-zə reʔ-sə reʔ
 Jowo-ERG speak-AOR-HS

‘The Jowo began to speak.’ (**Origin**)

This type of enunciations just describes an action which has been done based on the speaker’s indirect source of information, i.e., hearsay. The formulation /-zə reʔ-zə reʔ/ (AOR-HS) emphasises the source of information being what others said. However, in telling historical narratives, a story-teller tends to use a statement (or neutral) evidential for verb predicates to narrate what they believe as a historical fact, while the hearsay structure is used to narrate what is unclear enough to assume it as a historical fact (See Suzuki et al. 2015 for details). In any cases, the hearsay formulation tends to depend on a speaker’s preference, and the frequency of its use also varies, and it is also used in everyday conversations when one wants to emphasise “hearsay” as source of information, which is a typical feature of reported evidential (cf. Tournadre & LaPolla 2014, Aikhenvald 2015:139-140).

7 Typological notes

Based on observations regarding Aorist compared with Perfect in a story-telling, we can note the similarity of *passé simple* in French. The construction of a story which describes a past event evidently distinguishes *passé simple* from *imparfait* that is quite in parallel with Aorist and Perfect in Lhagang Tibetan. However, compared to *passé simple*, Aorist is also frequently used in everyday conversations in Lhagang Tibetan as described in Sections 3, 4, and 5. This implies that the principal function of Aorist in Lhagang Tibetan is different from *passé simple*; it might be better if we contrast Aorist of Lhagang Tibetan with *passato remoto* in Italian, which still appears in conversations.

In several languages possessing the Aorist category, such as Croatian (Magner 2000⁷:279-280) and Sanskrit (Renou 1996:436-439), Aorist is principally used in folk literature or story-telling. However, Modern Greek and Bulgarian (Vrinat-Nikolov et al. 2001:199-200) frequently use Aorist in any types of utterances; hence, a contrastive study of Lhagang Tibetan with the latter languages might clarify specific features of Lhagang Tibetan or Tibetic languages having the Aorist category.

8 Conclusion: What Aorist conveys in Lhagang Tibetan

This article described aspects of Aorist in Lhagang Tibetan. The principal function of Aorist is more or less “past perfective”, which can be expressed just with a suffix /-zə/. However, according to the speaker’s access to information, one can choose egophoric /-zə ji:/ or statement evidential /-zə reʔ/. Aorist’s *side* function emerges in certain utterances, especially in a narrative. Aorist, opposed to Perfect, describes a speaker’s focus on the action, which emphasises principal dynamic actions in a story-telling.

We find a peculiar combination of “Aorist + statement Perfect” (/ -zə ji:-k^he:/) in the narrative mode. This issue should be discussed more in detail.

Abbreviations

1: First person; 2: Second person; 3: Third person; AOR: Aorist; CAUS: Causative; CONJ: Conjunction marker; CPV: Copulative verb; DAT: Dative; DIR: Directional marker; E: Egophoric; ERG: Ergative; GEN: Genitive; HS: Hearsay; LOC: Locative; NEG: Negative; NML: Nominaliser; NSEN: Non-sensory; PFT: Perfect; Q: Question marker; SEN: Sensory

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